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Foundations of National Security Strategy

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EGYPT'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND "SADATCRAFT"

Introduction. When Anwar Sadat became president in 1970, he was the second Egyptian to rule Egypt since the Pharaohs had done so over 2,000 years before. And as if inspired by all the Egyptians since then, he masterfully led his country through difficult times to unprecedented peace, independence, and economic reform. His tools were military force, diplomacy, and leadership. Focusing primarily on the period between 1970 and 1973, I'll discuss Egypt's national security strategy and Sadat's statecraft, or "Sadatcraft," to highlight some lessons that not only made him successful, but may also benefit today's strategists.

Environment. When Sadat became president in 1970 following Nasser's death, Egypt's problems were extensive, yet somewhat common for an emerging nation.

Politically, President Nasser at the end of his rule had had poor relations with the other Arab states. Of equal concern was the Soviet Union's increasingly surrogate approach toward Egypt. However, Egypt's overriding dilemma was naturally with Israel. The Arab position after the 1967 war toward Israel was no negotiations, no recognition, and no settlement. Israel, with the security benefits of its territorial gains and a general distrust of Arab states, was relatively satisfied with its status. And, the superpowers seemed sufficiently content with the current cease-fire.

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Economic woes were significant, too. Challenges included high population growth and associated poverty, neglect of the country's vital agricultural base, the trade deficit, and the national debt (caused in large part by military conflicts). Exacerbating the situation were several other factors: government corruption; the "brain drain" of skilled labor working abroad; the loss of revenues from the Suez Canal closure and inaccessibility to Sinai oil fields; and USSR unreliability as a source of aid.

Militarily, wars in 1956 and 1967, as well as involvement in Yemen, had destroyed soldier morale and noticeably reduced military strength. And while one-third of Egypt's income was being allocated to defense, the military suffered from a lack of competent senior leadership.

Interests and Threats. Consistent with its predictable environment, Egypt had typical national interests: security, autonomy, prestige and status, and welfare. President Sadat accurately assessed his primary security threat to be Israel; and the autonomy intruder, the Soviet Union. In his view, successfully protecting security and autonomy interests would also be the key to improving Egypt's world status and welfare.

Objectives. President Sadat's strength as a leader is perhaps best shown in his shaping of national objectives. He was an extraordinary man of vision, thus focused on long-term objectives:

- a. A lasting peace with Israel, versus the ongoing ceasefire-war-ceasefire existence;
- b. True independence -- " . . . liberation of Egypt's national will";
". . . to tell the whole world that we are always our own masters";
- c. Economic and social reform that had "westernization" facets --
democratic institutions, privatization of businesses, and social justice.

Power and Resources. Sadat's great expectations for Egypt imply strong national power. Yet the country had only limited potential and mobilized power. On the potential side, the economy had "... fallen below zero"; the population was poverty-stricken and humiliated (from the '67 war); and the weak infrastructure was tied almost exclusively to the Nile. However, foreign aid from other Arab states and the USSR remained a possibility.

Mobilized power likewise fell short. Although still recovering from the 1967 war, the military had benefited from improved command-and-control facilities and new Soviet hardware with increased capabilities (unfortunately, deliveries had been sporadic).

Plans and Priorities. To close the gap between limited power and far-reaching objectives required sound plans and clear priorities. Sadat delivered. In effect, he was Egypt's grand strategy as his sense of what to do and when proved consistently correct.

Plans. After his 1971 peace initiative had failed, and due to apparent superpower apathy toward the Middle East, President Sadat realized he needed to bring attention to the area that would lead to a favorable Arab settlement. War was the attention-getter.

But to wage a war for peace would require some fancy political footwork on the world stage. In an awesome display of persuasive diplomacy, Sadat first revitalized relations with the Arab states. Then, he parlayed Arab support into OPEC pressure (the "oil weapon") on Japan and the EEC to endorse Arab demands. Finally, he convinced many African nations and other third-world countries to sever relations with Israel. In total, over 100 nations eventually supported the Arab cause with the US being a notable exception. Israel was virtually alone in the world.

President Sadat also needed to rally his nation to wage a "battle of destiny." He saw war as a way to divert the Egyptian people's attention from domestic problems and gain popular support. As Hitler had motivated the Germans to fight again after WWI, likewise Sadat inspired his nation to mobilize for war to regain its honor and dignity. And while he provided them some protection via a civil defense network and granted amnesty to imprisoned protesters, he also assumed the role of prime minister and essentially declared martial law to control his emotionally-high nation.

Having national and international political support was important, but the military's performance was the linchpin to Sadat's strategy. For ultimate success, the military had to regain some territory, inflict enough damage to show Israel's vincibility, and raise fears of superpower confrontation. Combined, these three short-range objectives would hopefully pressure Israel to negotiate with the Arabs. The military didn't have to win the war; rather, it had to achieve limited objectives.

To obtain those objectives, Sadat skillfully orchestrated preparations and artfully controlled the timing of events. Regarding preparations, abroad he convinced Syria and Jordan to commit forces to give the Israelis a multi-front military problem. Additionally, he garnered money and/or equipment from other Arab states, Yugoslavia, and Russia. With Russia, he tested their level of commitment, got what he could from them, then politely asked them to leave Egypt. Evidently, Sadat was willing to forego unreliable Soviet military support to gain a more non-aligned stance.

At home, he appointed a new commander-in-chief who enlisted field commander expertise to prepare an offensive campaign plan; then, aggressively trained the troops. Part of the training included exercises in May and August that deceived the Israelis into costly mobilizations.

Sadat's sense of timing significantly enhanced his preparation efforts.

Events were falling into place for an October 1973 war: the military was ready; Arab unity, typically shortlived, was still viable; and after the exercise false starts, Israel had lowered its guard (even more so with Yom Kippur ongoing). Of equal importance, the Egyptian people's patience was running out (Sadat had spoken of war as early as 1971). He knew he needed to act now, quickly and decisively, because the time was right and Egypt could only support a short war.

Priorities. In my opinion, President Sadat had two priorities. First, he gave preference to foreign relations over domestic relations, as evidenced in his actions prior to the war. And second, he placed Egyptian interests above Arab interests; his split in the late seventies with the other Arab countries to gain peace with Israel bears this out.

Outcome. Egypt had limited military success in the October '73 war, but won a great political victory. US involvement led to a cease-fire and negotiations that eventually resulted in the 1979 Peace Accords -- the lasting peace Sadat wanted. Even though the peace agreement with Israel caused a rift with the Arab states (Palestinian and territorial disputes unresolved), Egypt's independence was solidified -- Sadat's second long-term objective. Meanwhile, he had tactfully broken ties with the USSR while cautiously courting the US. Finally, with the war over he made domestic issues his first priority. Foreign assistance, especially from the US, offset reduced Arab support, and the country made economic/social gains. However, the slow peace process distracted Sadat from his domestic efforts, just as continued involvement with Iraq has diverted President Bush from his.

A Closer Look. Why did events unfold as they did? In my view, Sadat shaped history -- for a brief period he controlled Egypt's destiny.

Let's look in more detail at Sadat, the man, his statecraft and his strategy for Egypt.

The Man. He's been described in many ways: a self-proclaimed "peasant"; deeply religious; reflective; contemplative; modest; a man of vision; a historian; a mystic; pragmatic; principled; a master of deceit; instinctive; bold; courageous; undogmatic; cold-blooded; calculating; a terrorist; humane; poised; a leader; and a statesman. And I could add: a realist -- acted according to his nation's interests; an idealist -- sought a lasting peace (conflict was a temporary state); a transnationalist -- recognized that the PLO could influence the Middle East peace process; Machiavellian -- assumed the prime minister role and declared martial law (had also helped assassinate the pro-British Egyptian finance minister to further the revolution); Callieres-like -- was straightforward in his negotiations with other nations; and was the "arrow" thinker, not cyclical. There's some truth to all of these, but the personality traits that most characterize him are: deeply religious, pragmatist, man of vision, historian, and leader/statesman. In his efforts, he felt he was enacting the will of God and acting for all Egyptians, past and present. He studied the great leaders, especially those of ancient Egypt, and adopted their leadership qualities. He learned from Nasser's mistakes that a pragmatic approach may be better. Most significantly, he could see ways to transform current circumstances into stepping stones toward long-range objectives. Sadat, the man, was the compelling reason for Egypt's successes in the 1970's.

Statecraft. Sadat's command of all the tools, especially diplomatic persuasion, was comparable to Churchill's.

Diplomatic Persuasion -- Obtained the political support of more than 100 countries for the Arab cause. Also, he admirably spearheaded Egypt's public diplomacy effort; "... a master of the theatre of public life."

Coercive Diplomacy -- Energized OPEC to influence the western world and Japan with the "oil weapon" to the benefit of the Arab effort.

Abandonment -- Parted ways with the other Arab countries to finalize the peace agreement with Israel.

Use of Force -- Set limited military objectives to achieve major political ones.

Strategy. President Sadat, in his deliberate, contemplative fashion, was essentially Egypt's one-man strategist. Consequently, the country's strategy was a cohesive one. Similarly, he very effectively established priorities that focused the nation on the key event, the war. However, after the war, even though he shifted priorities to domestic issues, nontraditional threats (population growth, big-city problems, and energy dependence) remained. I suspect his obsession with the peace accords, combined with his preference for foreign relations over domestic, limited the effectiveness of his efforts; and in the end, led to his assassination. Nevertheless, he advanced skilled labor (reduced the "brain drain"), actively employed the military in civil projects, promoted long-range infrastructure programs, improved rural health care and education programs, and advocated women's rights. Lastly, he did NOT establish national objectives based on means to achieve them. He set the objectives first, then found a way to succeed.

Lessons. The lessons for the US are the parallels that can be drawn to the world situation today.

Vision. Nations need vision to know the long-term objectives that enable decisionmakers to stay on track as they work through short-term obstacles. What is our post-Cold War grand strategy? If we knew, we might more effectively determine appropriate levels of involvement in world affairs (for instance, economically and militarily) and establish needed priorities. Sadat's strategy was clear, cohesive and prioritized.

Means to Ends. A nation can set major objectives and achieve them with limited means. Can the US maintain its security commitments throughout the world with a smaller force? Make the UN more effective? Rely more on regional alliances? Sadat found a way; perhaps we can, too.

Individual/National Will. A strong leader can shape history -- mobilize a nation to strive for greatness; convince the people that his/her will is their will. What American leader has the credibility, the conviction and the charisma to set the US on a course for economic health? Anwar Sadat joins the list of history shapers: Ataturk, Churchill, Ghandi, Napoleon, Saddam Hussein, and Hitler, to name a few.

When you try to put yourself in Anwar Sadat's shoes and comprehend the multitude of opposition he overcame, you can't help but wonder if Allah willed Egypt's successes. You also realize Sadat wore some big shoes.

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